

# What Do Women Want?

*More and more the question is at the center of our politics.*

In the civil rights revolution of 20 and 30 years ago, the federal government helped lead the way. Now a similar revolution is well under way in the roles of women in the society and the structure of the U.S. family, but the government is hanging back a little, perhaps because the issues are less clear.

The story is familiar. As recently as 1960, only 19 percent of married women with children under 6 were in the work force, and only 39 percent with children of school age. The figure is now 54 percent for the first group, 68 percent for the second. Women are also heads of a sixth of all families now, up from a 10th in 1960. These women tend even more to work, out of necessity, but the families are disproportionately poor. The poverty rate for female-headed families is 34 percent, and largely because of that the rate for children is 20 percent; children now make up two-fifths of the nation's poor.

The question is how the government should respond. The new combinations of choice and need that women face are producing the most interesting issues in our politics. If you doubt it, leaf back through the records of the 100th Congress and the current presidential campaign.

■ **Child care.** This is the issue with highest visibility. Democrats in Congress are pushing a major grant program that their presidential candidate, Michael Dukakis, has endorsed in concept but not in cost. The Republicans have countered by proposing tax cuts; their candidate, George Bush, has called for a \$1,000 tax credit or payment from the Treasury for up to two children per family under age 5. Bush has added spin to the debate by saying that this subsidy should go to families in which the mother stays home as well as those in which the mother works. That is a cherished goal of conservatives, who don't want the government to take what they regard as sides against the "traditional" family. But even conservatives acknowledge that the issue is no longer whether the government should increase support for child care, but how.

■ **Parental leave.** The Democrats and some Republicans are also pushing legislation to require larger employers to give employees with newborns or sick dependents unpaid leave.

■ **Welfare reform.** The rise of the female-headed family is the whole subject.

■ **The child care tax credit.** A sharp philosophical debate has grown up around this provision. Some members of Congress

want to cap it—limit eligibility to poorer families—and use the proceeds to help pay for child care and/or welfare reform. But others insist that child care is a cost of producing income and, like all other such costs, should be deductible as a matter of right and definition without regard to income.

■ **Medicaid.** It now goes to fewer than half the poor. Proponents want to liberalize it and, to a greater extent than generally realized, have succeeded in doing so even in the Reagan years. Their tactic has been to extend the program not to all poor people at once but to poor pregnant women

*"Congress, in declaring new rights and benefits, is taking steps the full implications of which are not always spelled out or understood."*

and young children first. Women and children have been not just the beneficiaries of this battle but the shock troops.

■ **The WIC program.** This underappreciated, supplemental feeding program for women, infants and children has also been expanded against the Reagan grain. While other domestic programs subject to the appropriations process were being cut in the past eight years, this one was doubling in size. About a fourth of the nation's infants now receive some food from the program's nearly \$2 billion each year, and it is the buyer of about a third of the infant formula sold in the country. Yet it serves only about half of the women and children who have been made eligible; it will continue to expand.

■ **The fair-housing bill.** In the most important civil rights legislation of the second Reagan term, Congress strengthened fair-housing enforcement—and in the process, with less debate than the step deserved, created a new protected class. In the sale or rental of housing, it is now illegal to discriminate not just on such familiar bases as race or creed but against families with children.

■ **The Grove City bill.** The 100th Congress, in which civil rights groups did better than they themselves expected, also broadened the government's authority to ban discrimination by recipients of federal funds. The authority had been narrowed by the Supreme Court in the 1984 Grove City decision. The bill was held up for months not by a traditional civil rights fight but by a fight essentially between the Catholic Church and women's groups over abortion.

■ **The Bork nomination.** Women's groups were the great energizers of the opposition to Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court; they may have had the most to lose. One issue was Bork's position on abortion—he could find no general right of privacy in the Constitution to protect it—but another was his view of the application of the equal protection clause to women. The clause has been construed by the courts to forbid almost any distinction in the society on the basis of race. Women's groups want it construed the same way as to sex. Bork was unwilling to say it should be, and no position cost him more.

Not all these items have proceeded from the same agenda. The civil rights movement was never just about rights. It was interwoven with the antipoverty efforts of its day, and so it is here. The expansion of Medicaid is being pushed by a somewhat different coalition with different goals from those of the groups seeking strict application of the equal protection clause to women. The fact that poverty is now disproportionately a women's and children's issue is alternately of use to both the women's groups and the antipoverty people. The antipoverty people can say when convenient that redistribution of income is not the issue, children are. The women's groups can say that child care is not a women's but an economic and tax issue. They'll all be right. The blurring is good tactics, but it means that Congress, in declaring new rights and benefits, is taking steps the full implications of which are not always spelled out or understood.

But the clarity is coming. The elderly are still the most powerful constituency in Congress. But this sometimes competing constituency of women, children, families with children, the poor among all three—call it what you like—is plainly gaining ground. And should.

*The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.*

